

LEVEL 1 - 87 OF 115 STORIES

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Roll Call

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HEADLINE: JFK Conspiracy Is Resurrected in New Oliver Stone Film

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BODY:

It can be hazardous to read the New Orleans Times-Picayune during Mardi Gras - the inebriate goofiness of the street events seems to infect even that august journal of semi-public opinion.

And so, on Tuesday, Feb. 5, bumping to the lower depths of the front page both the federal budget ("only a sliver of pie is left to fight over") and the war ("Iraq is cracking, US general says," perhaps a bit hastily) is a banner-story about the fact that self-important, gap-toothed film director Press Alt-H for Help or Alt-Q to Quit.

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Oliver Stone is working on a project (enshrouded with as much secrecy as the Manhattan Project) detailing the flamboyant, ultimately destructive attempt by former New Orleans District Attorney (now a state appeals court judge of the 4th Appellate Circuit) Jim Garrison to prove conspiracy in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Stone has not only been meeting (secretly - one imagines them lunching heavily veiled at Galatoire's) with Garrison for several years but has acquired the rights to Garrison's latest bit of self-promotion-cum-self-exoneration in prose, On the Trail of the Assassins: My Investigation and Prosecution of the Murder of President Kennedy (Sheridan Square Press). The movie, entitled "JFK," will begin filming in April.

Although Garrison is, unfortunately as he sees it, enjoined legally from talking publicly about the project - "I'm not really great at keeping a secret, especially about something as exciting as this" - like any ham, he's delirious about the whole thing.

With the hyperbole that informed his career as D.A., he gushes over Stone's script: "It's a magnificent job and to be associated with a guy of this caliber is a real experience. It's like having Eugene O'Neill write it." (Erle Stanley Gardner being unavailable?)

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Stone may do an even worse job than O'Neill, an often awkward and sloppy, if undeniably powerful, writer.

As an auteur he is attracted to Big Themes and Big Characters (Vietnam,

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Bigotry, Ron Kovic, The Greedy Bull Market of the Eighties, Jim Morrison, etc., etc.) and handles them all at a one dimensionally fortissimo level.

He substitutes being "high-powered" for genuine power. Some of that nudging, overly indicative dialogue is so shrilly pitched only a dog could hear it. Visually he is, to be kind, obvious and didactic.

Garrison may indeed have found his most sympathetic interpreter: As a self-creation, Garrison is at least the equal of characters like Michael Douglas in "Wall Street" or Tom Berenger in "Platoon."

And now, stooped, gaunt of face, ever wilder of eye, Garrison may be working out that excess of show-biz in his veins perhaps dormant since his one-line role in "The Big Easy" (he played a judge).

One assumes that Stone, the Stanley Kramer of the '80s (and '90s) will depict Garrison as the latest edition of his standard Promethean Outcast fighting the insidious - even conspiratorial - System arrayed against him.

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The locals quoted in the Times-Picayune story, including William Alford, an assistant DA in the Garrison period, and Rosemary James, a PR woman and quondam journalist who gave the Garrison investigation a great deal of play at the time, seem dubious about the moralistic simplicity inherent in making Garrison the hero of the film.

Stone might have done well also to option the late James Kirkwood's furiously anti-Garrison American Grotesque, a sympathetic account of the effects of the case on Clay Shaw, the homosexual socialite branded and hounded by Garrison but vindicated in court after his life was, effectually, destroyed.

The richest dollop of cream in this jest is its announced casting: Kevin Costner will play Jim Garrison, a choice Garrison pronounces "a first-call selection," and Gee, why shouldn't he?

The dully handsome, almost absurdly bankable Costner in no way resembles Garrison, even a quarter-century ago. This is really la-la land! It isn't even like the way that Noel Coward or Sacha Guitry or Erich Von Stroheim (none of them remotely "conventionally attractive") cast themselves pro forma as irresistibly seductive as (well, some of the time) high-principled romantic leads - in their own productions, of course.

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The Costner-Garrison concoction resembles instead the 1946 Warner Brothers biography of Cole Porter, "Night and Day." First, Porter conned Jack Warner out of \$300,000 for the rights to Porter's life, which was then grotesquely distorted out of all resemblance to actuality.

Then Porter insisted on, and got, Cary Grant to play him in the movie (a casting dream also vainly cherished by John Kennedy and Lucky Luciano, according to Charles Schwartz, Porter's one reliable biographer).

Grant resembled Porter about as much as.... well, about as much as Kevin Costner resembles Jim Garrison.

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So who should play Garrison? Much as I'd like to fantasize about a dream version of his conspiracy caper, directed by someone like the early Capra or Hawks or Billy Wilder, written by Preston Sturges, with perhaps the young Edward Everett Horton cast against type as Garrison, or Boris Karloff, or Rex Harrison, or Van Heflin, or Frank McHugh (a Warner Brothers contract player of the '30s and '40s who specialized in amiable buffoons and heroes' best friends).

The only actor who seems to be capable of capturing the proper sinister tone is Christopher Walken whose look is sufficiently demented and whose skin even has the proper ghoulish pallor.

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Those conspiracy buffs who are wistful for the excessive days of the Warren Report "cover up," and Garrison and Mark Lane and the rest, are advised to wait for the film that's being made of Don De Lillo's superrealist creep-show novel *Libra* (Penguin), a more reputable literary source than the latest installment of Garrison's self-aggrandizement and a project more interesting to contemplate than another dose of Costner's blandness and Stone's strident rhetoric enshrining Jim Garrison.

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